



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

WITH HEART AND HAND AND VOICES

November 24, 2019

Compare the standard translation of Psalm 100 printed in your worship folder. Hear this one of Stephen Mitchell

Sing to the Lord, all creatures!  
Worship God with your joy;  
Praise God with the sound of your laughter.  
Know that we all belong to the realm of the sacred,  
That God is our source and our home.  
Enter his light with thanksgiving;  
Fill your hearts with her praise.  
For God's goodness is beyond comprehension,  
God's deep love endures forever. (translation by Stephen Mitchell)

What we claim as the first Thanksgiving, the source of our national tradition, almost didn't happen. The story begins in the summer of 1620 when one hundred twenty five eager folk (whose descendants became the Congregationalists) set out from Southampton, England, with the dream of coming to the new world to establish a faith community. They were aboard two leased ships, the Mayflower and the Speedwell, but as they made their journey around the southern tip of England, the Speedwell developed problems so they both had to pull in to Plymouth.

There it was determined that the Speedwell was not able to cross the Atlantic. So twenty of the original group gave up and went back home. One hundred five crowded onto the Mayflower and set out well behind schedule hoping to get to the colony of Virginia in time enough to build some shelter before the winter came. Instead they landed in New England in November.

Before the spring came to break the terrible cold, exactly half of the original group that had set out from Plymouth were in unmarked graves, their population devastated by so much disease and hardship in the harsh winter.

As the appointed time for the crew of the Mayflower to return to England drew nearer, the whole group wondered whether or not they should just give up and go back with them. But courage overcame despair and so they decided to stay. Then their fortunes turned for the better, mainly because the native inhabitants of this new world were wonderfully hospitable, sharing with these newcomers their land and the knowledge of planting and cultivating it. That summer these Pilgrims

from England built very substantial houses even as they reaped the harvest of the crops they raised in the rich and fertile soil of this new country that would become their home.

As the first anniversary of their arrival in the new world began to loom on the horizon, they pondered an appropriate ritual to acknowledge this significant event. Not surprisingly, the first suggestion was that they have a day of mourning. Every family had lost at least one person and many had lost several members of the family. They argued that the best way to commemorate the year was to remember those who had sacrificed their lives.

Others in the colony concurred that the loss of human life was devastating, and that the tragedy and grief was still weighing heavily upon their souls. But, they argued, we also have much for which to be thankful. They proposed making their first anniversary in the New World a day of thanksgiving instead of a day of mourning. The debate between the mourning party and the thanksgiving party occupied their discussions for a while, but ultimately, as we know, the thanksgiving party won the day.

Over two centuries later, on October 3, 1863, President Lincoln issued a proclamation which in part read,

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity . . . I . . . invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.”

Gratitude is, after all, a fundamental Christian emotion, at the very heart of our faith. Gratitude, the theologians remind us, is the basic human response to the goodness and mercy of God as well as to grace, God’s undeserved and unconditional love. At the heart of Christian experience and teaching is not guilt, as we have sometimes been taught; nor obligation, as we occasionally conclude and teach; but gratitude, pure and simple—gratitude for all that has been given us, not because we deserve it, or have earned it, but because God so loved the world. “Now thank we all our God with heart and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom the world rejoices.”

The late Lewis Smedes makes the same point in a little book he wrote shortly before he died. “When it comes to gratitude,” he wrote, “we who are old have an advantage. We have more good gifts to remember and therefore more opportunities to be grateful for them.” He said that over the years of his life he learned that “a gift always comes with a giver attached.” Smedes said he remembered “magnificent things and little things” and was grateful for both. “I remember that Jesus [came to demonstrate what it means to love with one’s whole life] , and I remember the Velcro that makes it easy to put on my sandals. I remember [my mother] and our first garage door opener. . . Big things, little things, it matters not so long as we remember they were gifts with a person attached” (*My God and I*, p. 170)

Some years ago the National Press Club invited the Reverend Fred Rogers ( aka Mr. Rogers of kids television fame) to one of its much publicized luncheons. The events are famous for bringing together top diplomats, government officials, leaders in business and industry, sometimes heads of state, and the press, of course. When Mr. Rogers was the speaker, attendees joked ahead of time that it was going to be a “light lunch.” Mr. Rogers began by taking out his pocket watch and announcing that he wanted to start his speech with two minutes of silence, during which he invited each person present to “remember people in their past—parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and others—who had made it possible for them to accomplish so much” and to be the success that they were today. . . . The room grew quiet as the seconds ticked away. A reporter said that one could hear all around the room

people sniffing as they were moved by the memories of those who had made sacrifices on their behalf and who had given them many gifts” (Thomas Long, *Testimony*, p. 110).

Karen Carpenter sang a short song many years ago that didn't make it to the top ten on the charts, but which has stuck in my mind all these years:

Sometimes, not often enough, we reflect upon the good things, and those thoughts always center around those we love. And I think about those people who mean so much to me, and for so many years have made me so very happy. And I count the times I have forgotten to say “Thank You”, and just how much I love them.

Let us pray that amid the hustle and bustle of preparation and activity this coming Thursday we will find time to acknowledge, even in perilous and sorrowful times, that we are grateful. Amen.

Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, Abundant Provider, you bless us with the gifts from the earth and you spread out goodness enough for all to share. This week we will join others in this land in thanksgiving for the many blessings we enjoy: for family and friend; for people who have stood by us in difficult times; for the freedoms we enjoy; for the wonder of being able to choose and to direct our energies to projects to which we feel a special kinship. Give us wisdom to choose wisely.

We give thanks for the laughter of children and for the joy we feel as we delight in the wonder of your created world. We celebrate the miracle and mystery of the earth, which teems with life even in the cold of winter, the sky that often makes our spirits soar, for warm shelter from the cold, and for exquisite beauty seen in icicles and snowflakes. We are grateful for your presence in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary.

We give thanks for the opportunity for education and employment even as we pray for those who face economic uncertainty. Ease their anxiety with the peace of your presence.

We lift our prayers for those who come to this holiday season grieving the loss of a loved one, even as we give thanks for the memories that sustain us in our losses. Bless each who suffers from loneliness especially felt in this season. Give them someone who will spend a moment noticing and loving. We offer up those who are ill, those in hospitals, those in nursing homes, those who cannot come home for the holiday. May the spirit of thanksgiving penetrate into the grimmest of situations so we might find beauty hiding in the ugliness of beasts that threaten to harm us.

Make each of us strong to face the days ahead. Deliver us from false security and comfort, desire for ease and uninvolved days. Let your word and spirit dwell in us that we may be used to bring your love to all, whom we should call our neighbors. In the name of the God who is at the foundation of our thanksgiving, the founder of the feast, Amen